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ABSTRACT

Project Success is a school site-based implementation of Lancaster County (South Carolina) School District's Safe and Drug Free Schools initiative. The program targets children and youth in grades 6-8 who have a history of violent and/or drug-related discipline problems (at least 4 major disciplinary violations in the school year). The problems must be both severe and chronic; Project Success children face expulsion from school if they commit another major rule violation. Thus, Project Success enhances safe, disciplined, and drug free schools by changing those children who are at risk for school failure due to violence and drug-related discipline problems. (Author)

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PROGRAM TITLE: Project Success

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PROGRAM OVERVIEW:

Project Success is a school site-based implementation of Lancaster County School District's (SC) Safe and Drug Free Schools initiative. The program targets children and youth in grades 6-8 who have a history of violent and/or drug-related discipline problems (at least 4 major disciplinary violations in the school year). The problems must be both severe and chronic; Project Success children face expulsion from school if they commit another major rule violation. Thus, Project Success enhances safe, disciplined, and drug free schools by changing those children who are at risk for school failure due to violence and drug-related discipline problems.

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Project Success provides an in-school setting for students, and creates and maintains a consistent, supportive, and disciplined environment for children through a team of pupil services personnel, parents, and members of related agencies. Project Success assumes that collaboration will reduce the chaos and unpredictability caused by competing social systems, which should reduce student violence and drug-related problems.

A single classroom houses all Project Success students. Students report directly to a full time teacher before the start of school every morning. Children are kept in the classroom (and away from other children) throughout the school day. Lunch breaks, trips from the classroom, and other out-of-class visits are held to a minimum, and planned to occur at times when other children were in class. However, as Project Success students gain skills, they are mainstreamed into regular classes on a limited basis.

PROGRAM PURPOSE

Project Success assumes that violence and drug-related problems in schools are a response to, and sustained by three things: (1) academic deficits, (2) insufficient social problem-solving/conflict resolution skills, and (3) inconsistent, chaotic environments that fail to support prosocial behaviors (and consistently discipline antisocial behaviors). However, the proximal cause of student difficulties is students' noncompliance with school behavior norms. Consequently, Project Success provides an intensive, highly structured alternative in-school experience to teach academics and study skills, conflict management and social skills, and drug awareness. Nonacademic behaviors essential to success are targeted in the behavior contract (and management program) that serves as the foundation for the Project Success experience. The

contract also integrates community services and family participation into the program. Project Success staff coordinate relevant systems in the child's life (i.e., school, family, community agencies/judicial systems) to promote a consistent, coherent milieu for the child. Project Success addresses the following outcomes: (1) increased behavioral compliance with school/teacher expectations; (2) improved nonacademic performance (e.g., increased attendance, reduced out of school suspensions); and (3) enhanced personal performance (e.g., self-esteem, relationships with others).

IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD

Project Success was implemented in January, 1994, in Barr Street Middle School. It continues to serve children as of this writing (November, 1994), and is expected to become a permanent fixture in the Barr Street Middle School.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAM SITE

The Lancaster County School District is located on the northern border of South Carolina, about 25 miles south of Charlotte, NC. The district enrolls 10,807 students, 5,386 of whom are in elementary school, 2,346 of whom are in middle school, and 2,985 of whom attend high school. Students represent rural, suburban, and urban homes, although a greater than average proportion are from rural settings. Barr Street Middle School enrolls 782 students. The school is located in Lancaster, SC, and serves predominately urban, African-American youth. The school was selected because it consistently has the highest number of referrals to the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) of any middle school in the district. The proportion of Barr Street students who become clients of the DJJ (9%) is 50% greater than the state average (6%) for 6-8 grade students.

TARGET POPULATION AND NUMBER OF STUDENTS SERVED

Project Success targeted those children most at risk of school failure due to violent or drug-related disciplinary infractions. Lancaster County School District policy specifies that students who commit 5 Level II (i.e., violent and/or drug-related) offenses in one school year must be expelled for the remainder of the year, and repeat the grade the following year. Consequently, students who have committed 4 infractions are at-risk of expulsion and subsequent failure. Also, they are most likely to affect the safety and well-being of other students in the school through their behavior. Consequently, those students who committed 4 Level II disciplinary infractions within the Fall, 1993 semester, and who were judged by staff as most likely to have an additional infraction, were included in Project Success.

Of the 23 students eligible for the program, 13 were admitted. During the 1994 spring semester (i.e., late January through June), 1 student "failed" the program (i.e., committed another major disciplinary infraction and was expelled from school), and 1 withdrew when the family moved to another school district. Consequently, 11 students participated in Project Success during the Spring, 1994 semester. These students returned to regular classes the following semester (i.e., Fall 1994).

In Fall, 1994, 18 new students entered the program. These students will be evaluated at mid-semester (i.e., 12 week) intervals. Those judged by staff to be ready to leave will return to the regular class program, and new students will be admitted. Those not ready to leave will stay the full semester, after which they will return to regular classes.

SERVICES PROVIDED

Project Success provides two types of services: (a) Coordination of services across

multiple agencies, and (b) Psycho-educational interventions to enhance student and parent knowledge, skills, and abilities. These services are provided in a culturally-sensitive and appropriate manner (i.e., culturally competent services).

Service coordination. Team members meet regularly to review student progress and to plan and adjust the program for individual students. The team is dedicated to agency--school collaboration, which provides consistent, coherent responses to student misconduct. Project Success assumes that collaboration will reduce the chaos and unpredictability caused by competing social systems, which should reduce student violence and drug-related problems. Consequently, the Project capitalizes on relationships between school staff and community agents. For example, the primary instructor is married to a police officer, and used to teach in a juvenile detention center. Consequently, she is able to use her relationships with DJJ and the Sheriff's Dept. to rapidly address and resolve problems such as attendance (e.g., she may go to the child's home with a police officer and inquire about the cause of a child's absence). She also receives information about Project Success students more rapidly and efficiently than normal bureaucratic channels often allow. Although this feature of the program would be difficult to replicate in other settings or with other personnel, Project Success deliberately exploits community assets and bonds to coordinate rapid and efficient system responses to student misconduct.

Psychoeducational intervention. The instructional core of Project Success uses pre-existing and innovative curricula. Specifically, the Project Success teacher uses: (1) the standard curriculum (i.e., students are taught what their peers are learning so they can return to the regular classroom); (2) Conflict Resolution: A secondary Curriculum; (3) Life Guides Program, (4)

Bridging the Test Gap and Making the Grade, and (5) Skillstreaming the Adolescent. Most of these curricula are available commercially, and were recommended by district pupil services professionals. The community mental health liaison teaches the STEP/TEEN: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting to parents to promote consistent parent-child interactions in the home.

Cultural competency. Project Success maintains sensitivity to culturally diverse students in three ways. First, parental involvement insures that the child's native culture is represented in the decision-making process. Second, team members comprised a variety of cultural and lifestyle perspectives, including African-American, European descent, females and males, and educated (professional) and lay perspectives. Third, individuals with expertise in multicultural issues reviewed program curricula and behavior contracts. Although materials are free from overt cultural biases, team members identify and resolve specific conflicts between families' cultural norms and school/agency expectations. Conflicts between families and schools/agencies (e.g., whether a child is ever justified in carrying a weapon to school) are acknowledged and addressed to insure consistent expectations across the student's various cultural and physical settings.

TYPE OF STAFF AND PROGRAM FTE

Team members (and their roles) include: Director of Student Services (<5% FTE) and school counselor (5-10% FTE) (team leaders, administrative support), a social worker (5-10% FTE) (family contact and social skills trainer), school psychologist (<5% FTE) (data collection/program evaluation), juvenile justice representative (5-10% FTE) (probation and DJJ liaison), community mental health therapist (10% FTE) (parent education), teacher (100% FTE) (academic skills, experiential study habits, behavior management system), community counseling

representative (<5% FTE) (drug awareness and affective education), and parent (unknown FTE) (home follow through).

COST OF PROGRAM AND FUNDING SOURCES

Project Success operated on a per-semester cost of $30,550 since its inception. The direct costs were limited to the teacher salary, field experiences for students, and supplies and equipment. The indirect costs include teacher benefits, and the cost of all other personnel. Direct costs have been largely offset by an external grant (from the Springs Foundation) for $30,000/year. Indirect costs have been absorbed by participating agencies. It is expected that external funding will continue, but it is possible that the district might elect to absorb the costs of the program through staff reallocation if external funds are unavailable.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED AND SOLUTIONS

Project Success has encountered, and attempted to resolve, the following problems:

1. Long-term student support. As the program is currently designed, students simply leave the program at the end of 12 or 24 weeks. We recognize that this is less than ideal; students need continued support to gradually transition out of an intense treatment setting. Therefore, we are exploring two possible solutions. The first is to recruit college student mentors from the local University of South Carolina campus. It is assumed that mentor/tutors would work on a volunteer basis, and would provide ongoing guidance to Project Success "graduates." The second solution is to maintain and expand parent support. Currently, parent education is provided only while students are enrolled in Project Success. We are negotiating with community mental health to continue services to parents after children leave the program.

2. Program evaluation. Because there is a strong desire to serve those children whom staff judge as "most in need," we have not randomly assigned eligible students to treatment and control conditions. This complicates Project evaluation. Because we selected the "most at-risk"

cohort into the program, the failure to find differences between Project students and non-treated peers could mask an effective treatment effect. In other words, because those judged "most in need" are no different from those judged "less in need," the program might be helping. Or is the program simply ineffective? We have tried to address this issue (see below), but we have not resolved it.

PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS/OUTCOMES

See below.

EVALUATION DATA

Outcome data are available only for the Spring, 1994 cohort of Project Success students. The treatment group (n = 11) included the most severe cases; the 10 students not admitted to the Project were the control group. The treatment group averaged lower grades, less attendance, and more frequent and severe rule violations for the semester preceding program than the control group. Therefore, the program used a nonequivalent groups quasi-experimental design to evaluate outcomes.

The program measured outcomes in three ways: (1) unobtrusive data describing school adjustment (i.e., absences, grades, and days of in-school suspension); (2) surveys of students, parents, and teachers regarding their perceptions of student change on 7 objectives reflecting academic performance, social adjustment, and intra-personal growth in students; and (c) cost-benefit analyses of adjudication costs for treatment and control groups during the Spring, 1994 semester. Comparisons between the treatment and control students favored treatment students on all unobtrusive variables (i.e., treatment students had fewer absences, higher grades, and fewer days of in-school suspensions). Cost-benefit data supplied by the DJJ were inconclusive, due to

the low frequency of DJJ contacts across the Spring semester. None of the comparisons reached statistical significance, and so they cannot be interpreted as showing a reliable effect for the Project treatment.

Survey results supported program outcomes, although the results were not uniform across classes of respondents. Teachers ranked Project Success students as superior to control students on all 7 objectives (all $X^2(2) > 9.20$, $p < .01$). All student and parent ratings showed a higher proportion of Project Success students received positive rankings than control group students, suggesting support. However, many statistical contrasts were nonsignificant, in part because fewer parents and students responded to the survey.

The results suggest that Project Success was successful in achieving its immediate objectives (i.e., increased compliance with school expectations, as shown by consistently positive teacher rankings for treated children). Other data suggest that Project Success is also making progress toward meeting its longer term goals (i.e., improved nonacademic performance, enhanced personal competence, and cost-benefit ratio), but there are not sufficient data to draw firm conclusions. On-going, longitudinal evaluation of the Project, and Project graduates, is needed to detect the durability and magnitude of program effects.

PUBLICATIONS DESCRIBING/EVALUATION PROGRAM

None at this time. We expect to produce them as longitudinal data are available.

ADDITIONAL RELEVANT INFORMATION

Consultation and site visits are welcome. Please contact Kathy Durbin for site visitation and information about program implementation. Please contact Jeff Braden for information about program evaluation.